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ABSTRACT

The Bilingual Bicultural Act of 1968, which mandates teaching in the native language of children with limited ability in English, is not obeyed in the Navajo Reservation where the schools' teaching to normal and special education students is in English. This violates the rights of peoples with a foreign language and culture to be educated basically in their own language. For the mentally retarded, physically handicapped, and emotionally disturbed Navajos this represents a double jeopardy, as they cannot independently surmount the deprivation imposed upon them. (Author/SBH)

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BILINGUAL- BICULTURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION IN THE NAVAJO RESERVATION - MYTH OR REALITY?

Presentation to the Council for Exceptional Childern- international Conference
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ABSTRACT

The Bilingual Bicultural Act of 1968 mandates teaching in the native language of children with limited ability in English. This Law is not obeyed in the Navajo Reservation where the schools teaching is in English. This violates the rights of peoples with a foreign language and culture to be educated basically in their own language. For the mentally retarded, physically handicapped and emotionally disturbed Navajos this represent a double jeopardy, as they cannot independently surmont the deprivation impossed on them.

BILINGUAL BICULTURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION IN THE NAVAJO RESERVATION MYTH OR REALITY?

The programs designed to provide education to the Native Americans seem to have followed a pattern set first by the so called "Chicano Model", in that the bilingual aspect seemed satisfied with a team concept for teaching. This team was alternatively formed by a monolingual and bilingual teacher simultaneously working with a group of children and providing the instruction in the native and English language, or a bilingual teacher and a bilingual teacher's aide. (1)

For some time it seemed that if the child learned English he would succeed in all areas of cognitive growth. Despite this widespread model,it was obvious that the Native American children were not achieving at the level of other children, neither in Public School, Boarding Schools (BIA), nor Private Schools. The reasons for this lack of achievment in the Navajo Nation, documented extensively by the Rock Point Community, Rock Point Arizona, in a paper delivered September 6th, 1977 to the subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary and Vocational Education of the House Education and Labor Committee, were, summarily stated:

1) English is more of a foreign than a second language for most Navajo Communities
2) Research has shown that two thirds of all Navajo students enter school without enough English to do first grade work in language.

The back up hard data that proves this point, being made in that paper(1)(namely that teaching English as a foreign language proves

to be highly beneficial for the Navajo child), is in reference to the degree of progress in reading and writing skills in the Navajo Nation School's population, as compared with nationwide scores.

It is a fact well known that Native American children do score significantly lower in most subjects in school. Bureau of Indian Affairs and Public Schools statistics prove this fact (*)

The program at Rock Point demonstrates this not need to be so. It has taken ten years, though, for this small community controlled contract school, to gather statistically significant data and to show evidence that those students that had a continuous bilingual education were doing better than those who had education predominantly monolingual (English). (2)

All of the above, though, pertains to the education of the normal child, in a regular class setting.

The fundamental facts related to the statistics alluded in the above mentioned studies, have to do with the most basic processes of learning. We will analize these processes since they are our rationale for our own approach to teaching and training the mentally retarded Navajo Child.

The first years at Chinle Valley School, the logical model to follow was the "Chicano Model" described above. There was a strong belief that learning English is essential to progress and adaptation to a predominantly English society. We dotted each class with a monolingual Teacher, duly certified in special edu-

cation and a para-professional Teacher Aide, bilingual, who was working towards her certification and degree as a special education teacher .

We proceeded to buy every "Reading" "Math" and "Social Studiees" commercially produced program and set to work at bleaching our good natured indian mentally retarded children. This we did for three consecutive years. Despite the hard work, the proportion of children who learned meaningful language and managed English symbols was very low.

Though by definition, bilingual-bicultural education is to instruct the child using his native language as a basis for learning till second language skills have developed sufficiently,(3) it was not certainly because we were dealing with a range of mental retardation that was below all accepted gimmicks of training and teaching, that our students failed to obtain a functional command of English.

Testing with conventional anglo biased and normed tests, was consistent with low I.Q. but we suspected something alse was basically wrong. As most often happens, our children displayed social graces and adaptation and ability to learn English, beyond the bleak I.Q. testing figures.

When we hired a Psychometrist with some experience in working with Native Americans, we proceeded to translate the conventional tools of testing used before, into Navajo.

This was not a move fully guaranteed by normalization and statistical procedures. It could not be, since we were primarily

addressing our efforts to testing our own population, and norms have not been established as yet, for Native Americans, (let alone Navajos), anywhere in the the Nation. Yet, the contrast with the scores obtained when the children were tested in English and when tested in Navajo, were enough to prompt our wonder and to question the efficiency of testing children in a language not their own.

Here it is well to refer to the law making mandatory the testing of individuals in their language of preference. (P.L. # 94-142).

We have still to do all of what is required to obtain statistical validity of these translated tests, obtaining norms in a Navajo population, and we profess to do that during the next two or three years.

Testing in the language of choice puts a very important element in evidence, namely, that the percepts basic to conceptualization processes are better elicited by the language that one inheritantly possess.

We do profess to further research the area of cognitive growth as it relates to language learning and acquisition.

Navajo seems to be a language based primarily in concrete, perceptually linked processes. English has a more abstract content. Our students may succeed at first in learning the more concrete aspects of English, failing when the sentence structure requires phonemes which cannot be linked to an image.

It is our contention that the concrete quality of the mentally

retarded child's thinking (4) suggests a right hemisphere based or at least, a "right hemisphere type" of structural organization. (5), (6), (7).

Our Navajo mentally retarded students should then, be granted their first experiential, perceptually based language associations to be made in their own language, which provides the neurological foundation for the learning process to be structured on a perceptual basis.

For learning to take place, there is need of a process of integration of the sensory information and the processes of association leading into the formation of ideas or concepts. These processes take place in the "associational" areas of the brain, which surround the "primary" areas that are the "collectors" of the information brought to the brain by the sensory pathways. (A)

All of this points out to the need of furnishing the child with information through his senses, that he is going to be able to process in order to obtain "learning" of some kind: aural channels, visual channels, tactile channels, are tapped in the process of teaching handicapped children, so they can "sort" information and process it properly. This is an approach known as "sensory stimulation" and we use it previous to any other type of teaching and/or training as early as our Infant Stimulation class.

But when the child passes the first grouping ("readiness concept"), and is expected to learn to read and to write, and have some mathematics concepts, (groupings II and III in our school)

they are to use some of the abstract thinking that goes along with the use of symbolic communication. Here is when the language plays the more critical role. (8)

There is little of language based learning in the first steps of training and learning: the child learns to control bodily functions through organically based routines that consolidate habits. That type of learning that has little to do with cognitive growth is properly termed "training".

Learning a language foreign to our own is a feat of the intellect, since it affects primarily the higher functions of the brain, where cognitive growth takes place. (9). Native Americans have been "force feed" the English language since 1846, by sheer determination of their conquerors, but not necesarilly the English taught them was attempted after an acceptable degree of literacy was obtained in their first language (Navajo).

Today, thanks to the pioneering work of Rock Point, we know that the process of acquisition of the foreign language (English) is better integrated once the basic knowledge of the native language is obtained. This means briefly, that the cummulative effect of learning the discrimination of sounds, symbols and meanings in the native language permits the process of translation (into English) to be consolidated and better secured. As the child is expected to increase his vocabulary and range of concepts through reading and writing skills acquisition, from first grade on, the fundamentals of his own language help him to refer to known images and experiences and to expand his associations,

therefore to obtain the equivalent concept in the foreign language with sound basis.

The whole spectrum of the Federal Education System in the Navajo Reservation (1) is at fault by merit of its inconsequential follow up through the years. This follow up basically the result of all the "good" intentions and "bad" or "unrealistic" expectations the system had, relying on models of teaching that were of no use for a culturally rich nation such as the Navajo.

If a cultural group has not developed a communication system that is in paragon with the other accepted systems of communication, then using the "English only" paragon may be applicable. Navajos have a language (a symbolic counterpart to an oral communication devise) with ground rules and regulations (grammar and logical structure).

They can and should logically learn English as a foreign language.

Because English culture is biassed towards reading-writing standards, accomplishments and progress in the context of a nationally wide valid score is not realistic in the Navajo Nation (8). Therefore our curriculm emphasis is now, following Rock Point Cummunity School data, in accord with all of the above, for a Navajo literacy first, English language, as a foreign language, second.

In this spirit, our academic curriculum which is in the process of formulation, follows these tenets:

1) Navajo literacy should be obtained at about a first grade level, before English reading/writing is attempted.
2) English literacy should be attempted as a foreign language, only when the percepts and concepts can readily be exchanged in either language befire writing and reading is to be enforced.

In support of these contentions, we refer to an elemental principle of verbal learning:

"It is essential that the learner come to perceive each stimulus in a learning situation in a relatively consistent fashion, if a given stimulus is to become associated with a given overt response" (10)

This is a reference to the process of "stimulus identification" a process that must occur if association formation is to be achieved. (10).

Our students typically are in a stimulus situation that is 100% Navajo outside their classrooms. The proportion of consistency from teacher teaching (English) to environmental teaching (Navajo), is lost, since the majority of the child's time is in a Navajo verbal learning.

The consistency factor also bears importance in regards to the frequency and familiarity elements of verbal learning and its meaningfulness.(Frequency refers to how often does a word appear in the language, or to the frequency linked to the experiencial aspect of learning through "doing", or the actual integration of meaning into actions. Retarded students more often

need the over learning through repetition, drilling and practical involvement in motor responses.

Other basic processes of verbal learning, such as reponse and associative learning, stimulus discrimination, selection perception and attention, stimulus coding, etc. are to be considered in the same manner when teaching language.

Therefore, the learning proper is to be done in Navajo (if it has to occur at all), and then transferred into English.

Curriculum is, of course, not only that part of the teaching-learning situation whose content is identified as classroom instruction; we want to define our curriculum as the body of training and cognitive prescriptions that express our philisophy as a total Navajo oriented environment. We want to help our youngsters to become what they inherently are, Native Americans, thru the acculturation elements of the prevalent anglo society, without losing the typical ethnic characteristics of the Navajo society.

To incorporate the basic principles of the child rearing methods proper to Navajo culture, in the daily routine and in the observance of norms of self identification, the reciprocity with environment and nature and the typical manner of establishing and cultivating relationships, is our goal.

The training of staff, thus, can be considered from this standpoint of Navajo treatment, a considerable part of our curriculum. We teach Anglo and Navajo staff the basics of Navajo child development, the essence of the personality development concepts as

taught by the elders, the differences between Navajo mental health and Anglo mental concepts.

To reach the point where adaptation and progress take place without losing sight of the individual identification with one's human group, to obtain a sociological context for the growth of each one of our students, we have to obtain a levelled and consistent feeling of belonging and adaptation in the part of the students's teachers.

We are mobolizing towards a prevalent Navajo bilingual personnel, even at the expense of State standards, with the aim at training teachers, teacher aides and child care technicians, who are competent in all aspects of Navajo culture. These will be the best qualified teachers for our student population, because they will have the best of both worlds to offer to our needy children.

The retarded children cannot compensate for defects of systematically wrong schooling, they cannot elude the environment, escape their circumstances, leave the Reservation and make up for lost time.

Back in the hogan (C) when they leave us, they ought to survive and be able to find meaning where meaning is available: in the sameness and in the safety of the well known.

NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

(A)- Sensory Pathways (with the exception of smell),relay through the thalamus to the cerebral cortex

(B)- Since most Navajos do not know how to write or read their own language, their ability to [illegible] and write in English is handicapped.

(C)- Hogan: Home in Navajo. Traditional eight sided one room structure.

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(1) Testimony, etc. before the subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary and Vocational Education of the House Education and Labor Committee Wash D.C. June 1977 by Wyne Holm, Director, Rock Point Community School

(2) Bilingual education at Rock Point- some early results- by Paul Rosier & Merilyn Farella,Tesol- Quarterly- Vol 10 No 4- December 1976

(3) "A Better Chance to Learn" - Bilingual Bicultural Education- United States Commission on Civil Rights - Clearinghouse Publications # 51 May 1975

(4) " The Diagnosis of Reasoning in the Mentally R etarded"-Barbel Inhelder Professor Institut des Sciences de l'Education- Universite Geneve- Publ. the John Day Co. N.Y.

(5) "Contributions of Neurology,Neuropsychology and Luria's Neuropsychology of Memory-(197)- to the understanding of learning disabilities" Norman Barreman EdD Assoc. Prof. of Psychology NAU 1977

(6) "Coding & Retrieval Process & the Hemispheres of the Brain"- J.S.Seamon in "The Hemisphere Function in the Human Brain" S.J. Dimmond & J.G. Beaumont Editors. Halsted Press Book- John Wiley & Sons N.York 1974

(7) "On Cognitive Growth" I.J.S. Brunner 1977- In Brunner J.S.Olver, R.R. and Greenfield P.M. (eds)"Studies in Cognitive Growth" Wiley N.Y.

(8) "Language or verbal behavior is tied up with thinking and symbolic activities and serves to mediate a variety of events"- "Fundamentals ofHuman Learning and Cognitive Characteristics of Verbal Learning" P-33 Henry C. Ellis, Wm Brown Co. Publ. Iowa 1977

(9) " How Meaningfulness Affects Learning" - P 51 to 53- In particular "response integration". Another implication that follows from our discussion applies to learning of a foreign language vocabulary, much of which is a case of "response learning"-Ibid.

(10) "Fundamentals of Human Learning and Cognition" Henry C.Ellis Wm Brown Co. Publ. Iowa 1977- Page 6-7

(*) Statistics on Arizona District,State and National S.A.T. scores available upon request.